Taking Action on First Nations Language Priorities
Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation Connection Grants – Position Paper

Introduction

On December 13–14, 2018 the language gathering Taking Action on First Nations Language Priorities: Reconciling Research with Attaining Fluency in Na-Dene Languages was held at the Transportation Museum in Whitehorse, Yukon. The gathering was funded through a SSHRC Special Call Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation Grant and updated Yukon First Nations’ language priorities that were identified in previous gatherings held by the Self-Government Secretariat and the Council for Yukon First Nations (Council for Yukon Indians 1992).

All 14 Yukon First Nations were represented at the gathering, along with delegates from Yukon-wide institutional partners, as well researchers from partner universities in Canada and the USA. Over a hundred people from across the Yukon, British Columbia, Alberta and Alaska attended the two-day gathering. The purpose of the meeting was to provide a forum for Yukon First Nations Elders and language workers to discuss their language priorities and goals and to formulate policy recommendations that will support them in creating long-term language plans and implementing language programming and projects. The language gathering was also held to address the TRC Calls to Action that reference Indigenous languages and education, including #14 identifying the urgency of preserving Aboriginal languages, #16 calling for university programs in Aboriginal languages, #43 calling for the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (in which Article 13 addresses rights to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations histories, languages, oral traditions, and philosophies, and Article 14 addresses the right to control education), and #62 calling for funding Indigenous knowledge in Aboriginal schools and post-secondary institutions.

Meeting Structure

The gathering ran from 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. each day. Both days were opened and closed with a prayer given by an Elder from a different First Nation. The opening keynote address was given by Dän nätthe äda Kaaxnox (Chief Steve Smith), from Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, which recently pledged up to a million dollars a year to fund an adult immersion language program in Southern Tutchone (Jones 2018; Rudyk 2018).

The gathering was organized around 4 thematic sessions: (1) Integration of Indigenous realities, values and traditions in language programs (2) Productive approaches to achieving fluency and advanced proficiency (3) Uses of digital technologies for language work and (4) Training programs to build community capacity for language work. In each session there were (1) several presentations about current language projects being undertaken by Yukon First Nations and (2) several presentations that addressed current and potential resources and support available for this work from institutions based in the Yukon and from university researchers based in neighbouring regions. As such, language teachers, learners and workers from Yukon First Nations
presented on their ongoing language projects and initiatives. Yukon institutional partners presented on the ways in which they are, or can, support these and future community language projects and initiatives in the Yukon. University-based researchers based in British Columbia (University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University), Alberta (University of Alberta), Ontario (Carleton University) and Alaska (University of Alaska-Fairbanks) presented on the specific types of resources available to support community-initiated language projects and the types of support they can provide communities in their language work.\(^1\)

After each presentation, the floor was opened to all attendees to provide community responses and contributions. Understandably, these discussions focused on the need to reclaim Yukon languages by actively using them in these and similar venues, and not just by talking about them in English. As such, many Elders shared their thoughts first in their language (and then later translated in English) and a number of presenters presented in their heritage language (then later translated in English).

**Community Responses and Contributions**

Many community members contributed to the wider discussions after each presentation and shared their own experiences, thoughts and recommendations about both the presentation material and how it related to their, or their communities’, language goals and wider language priorities in the Yukon overall. These discussions anchored the gathering because they represented a rare opportunity for representatives of all 14 First Nations in the Yukon to be together for the purpose of talking about their languages.

A number of recommendations and priorities came out of these open floor discussions as well as recommendations regarding policies that would recognize and support future language revitalization work in the Yukon. The recommendations and priorities discussed also related to national ongoing dialogues about reconciliation and what this means to individual First Nation communities and communities in the Yukon specifically.

Notes were taken during the entire event (presentations and discussions), specific policy recommendations were written on posters on easels at the front of the room, and the entire gathering was video recorded. Additionally, each attendee was also provided with large sticky notes and asked to share any additional feedback and recommendations they had.

**Yukon Language Priorities and Recommendations**

We have identified 12 language priorities and policy recommendations for Yukon First Nation languages below that emerged from these community discussions and feedback cards. Under each theme we have listed additional sub-priorities and recommendations:

1. **Capacity Building/Training in the Yukon and in Yukon communities**

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\(^1\) See full meeting schedule here: [https://yukonlanguagepriorities.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/schedule-taking-action-on-first-nations-language-priorities-12918.pdf](https://yukonlanguagepriorities.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/schedule-taking-action-on-first-nations-language-priorities-12918.pdf)
a. Accredited courses/programs should be available for language teaching
b. Accredited courses/programs should be available for language learning
c. Accredited courses/programs should be available for technology use/archiving/data management
d. Graduate training for Indigenous students in fields relating to language work should be a high priority.
e. When non-Indigenous researchers/workers come to work in communities, community members should job shadow them
f. Capacity building should take place in the Yukon and in communities (people shouldn’t have to leave to learn these skill sets)

2. **Increase funding for the language activities of the major institutions with Yukon-wide responsibilities for enhancing fluency, language training, and preserving language records.**
   a. Funding needs to be enhanced to 1) meet Yukon Land Claims obligations, 2) address the effects of Residential Mission Schools, 3) support all Yukon First Nations in efforts to enhance the language proficiency of their members, 4) address the recommendations in TRC, 5) uphold and meet the recommendations in the United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples
   b. Yukon Native Language Centre (YNLC)
      i. Financial support should be increased for programming, including training programs for language fluency/proficiency, teacher training and immersion program training
      ii. Funding should be increased for language documentation and safe storage of language records, inclusive of a database that organizes and provides access to resources from all Yukon First Nation languages
      iii. Funding should be increased to be able to develop curriculum and learning teaching resources, inclusive of training and implementation at the community level
   c. Council for Yukon First Nations (CYFN)
      i. Financial support should be provided for a First Nations language and cultural center that includes an archive
   d. Northern Native Broadcasting Yukon (NNBY)
      i. Funding is urgently needed to index, digitize and store recordings constituting an extensive record of Yukon languages and related knowledge
      ii. Financial support should be provided for broadcasts in Yukon First Nations languages
   e. Yukon Education
      i. Support should be enhanced for language activities on the land and with Elders for students and language teachers
      ii. Support is needed to provide language teachers with the opportunity to become highly proficient in their language
iii. Mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that the school language programs are in concert with the First Nation language programs

f. Yukon College
   i. Financial support needs to be provided for courses that build skills needed to support language work, including computer skills, the management of digital records, administration, grant writing, film making, oral history recording, etc.
   ii. The College needs to be actively involved in planning activities and discussions of community language needs

g. Yukon Archives
   i. Funding needs to be provided to allow the Archives to provide secure storage for language records

3. Language teaching
   a. Teachers should be assessed to ensure that they are proficient enough in the language being taught to teach effectively.
   b. Teachers’ language abilities should be assessed by elders
   c. Must develop appropriate evaluation and assessment protocols for teaching and learning
   d. Teachers have to be accredited in a way that ensures certification
   e. Teachers need to be supported with effective language curriculum, assessment tools, learning and teaching resources and training in 2L methodologies and pedagogy

4. Language learning
   a. Holistic and integrated supports for creating and supporting language learners
   b. Language learning, even for fluent speakers, is a lifelong process and opportunities to speak, hear and connect with other speakers and learners is necessary
   c. Should happen in the home
      i. It brings families together
      ii. Focus on teaching parents who then can teach children in the home context
   d. More of the K-12 curriculum should include First Nations languages
      i. Focus should be on oral teaching and learning (not literacy)
   e. Should be on the land as much as possible

5. Language programs
   a. Develop/support language programs that:
      i. Focus on oral teaching/immersion
      ii. Immersion and coursework with at least 900-1000 hours per year is creating fluent speakers with the higher proficiency
      iii. That are on the land
      iv. That make use of technology
v. Where learners are compensated
vi. That are continuous and sustained – i.e. not the ‘stop and go’ model

6. Inclusion of Elders
   a. Elders should have a central role in daily revitalization work
   b. Elders get tired easily and don’t have the capacity to teach everyone
      i. It’s important to train language teachers or to have intensive immersion programs (like Champagne Aishihik First Nations are doing) where Elders teach a small group, who then can assist in teaching others
   c. Elders should inform cultural protocol

7. Protocol Development
   a. Create guidelines/protocols for universities to follow
   b. Create Language (and culture) acts for Yukon First Nations
   c. Develop ‘best practices’ or guidelines for accessibility of intellectual property and resource creation/sharing
   d. All protocol/policy needs to be inclusive, have a purpose, generate resources and have a positive feedback loop
   e. Make Yukon First Nations languages official languages of the Yukon Territory

8. Partnership and Sharing
   a. First Nations need to have opportunities to share with each other what they’re doing and what they’ve learned
   b. There should be longer, and more, language gatherings and meetings for knowledge and resource sharing, such as regional language gatherings, community gatherings and at least one large gathering every year for all languages.
   c. Knowledge and resource sharing need to be prioritized
   d. Students/teachers/people in different language programs need to be able to connect with each other
      i. Perhaps through videoconferencing or regular language meetings
   e. The role and partnerships of institutions should be defined and agreed upon –
      i. i.e. CYFN, YNLC, YFNs, FNEC, PACFNI, FNPP, etc.
   f. Compile a list of the different universities that could be involved (Yukon College, UBC, SFU, UVic, UofA, UAF & UASE) and the specific people there and the specific support they could provide, which could streamline the process of working with universities and ensure students and researchers are adhering to established protocols

9. Reclaiming spaces
   a. Having language spaces in communities where only the language is spoken
b. Learning language on the land

10. Technology/Archiving
   a. It’s important to assess how technology can support these efforts
   b. Need to determine the technology capacity in communities
   c. Strategize ways to effectively use technology (teaching, learning, archiving, etc.)
   d. Build capacity of language technologies and also people who are trained in the use of these technologies
      i. Having annual training courses/certifications through Yukon College or the Yukon Native Language Centre.
   e. Ensure long-term data storage and transition to new technologies
   f. Ensure support for both institutional/community archives and personal archives
   g. Archives need to be living archives

11. Recordings and other records of Yukon First Nations languages that are outside the Yukon should be returned to Yukon First Nations for use by community members.

12. Indigenous methodologies and perspectives need to be used throughout this process

   Many of the above priorities are inter-related and inter-dependent, which illustrates the ways in which language revitalization and reclamation is a complex process that involves a multitude of individuals, institutions and policy working together in tandem. Additionally, these priorities and policy recommendations also align with the interrelated themes in the call for these position papers.

   These recommendations would support Indigenous Talent and Research Careers by providing increased training opportunities related to language work to First Nation community members in the Yukon (teaching, archiving, language documentation, etc.) (Priorities #1, 3, 5, 6, 10). These priorities also Engage Indigenous Knowledge through community-informed language initiatives and programming that will often focus on immersion language programs held on the land through engagement with cultural practices and Indigenous knowledge systems (Priorities #4,5,6,9,12). Yukon First Nation communities also prioritized the Mobilization of Knowledge and Partnerships for Reconciliation, which involves increased accessibility and sharing of language revitalization resources and tools between communities and institutional and university partners, as well as between each other (Priorities #2, 8, 11). Lastly, these priorities include Fostering Mutually Respectful Relationships, where Yukon First Nations will collaborate to create protocols for engagement with, and documenting of, their language and related cultural heritage (Priority #7).
One of the most frequently voiced priorities during the language gathering was that there needs to be more language gatherings where First Nations communities from across the Yukon can regularly come together to not only support each other in their language programs, but to also heal and form new partnerships and relationships with each other through this language work. As such, these language priorities and policy recommendations from Yukon First Nations not only acknowledged the need for reconciliation on a national and policy level, but also for reconciliation and healing within and between First Nations communities in the Yukon.

Appendix

References


Genetti, Carol and Rebekka Siemens. 2013. “Training as Empowering Social Action: An Ethical Response to Language Endangerment,” in *Responses to Language*


Print version in press.


**Online resources (Websites)**
Alaska Native Language Archive, [https://www.uaf.edu/anla/](https://www.uaf.edu/anla/)


Doyon Foundation Language Home, [https://doyonfoundation.com/static/OnlineLanguage.aspx](https://doyonfoundation.com/static/OnlineLanguage.aspx)

First Voices, [https://www.firstvoices.com/](https://www.firstvoices.com/)

Kaska Language Website University of British Columbia, [https://kaska.arts.ubc.ca/](https://kaska.arts.ubc.ca/)

Lingít Yoo X’átángi, http://tlingitlanguage.com/


Tlingit Conversations http://www.uas.alaska.edu/arts_sciences/humanities/alaska-languages/cuped/video-conv/

Yukon Native Language Centre, http://www.ynlc.ca/